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Oral history interview with Ed Moulthrop, 2001 April 2-3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Edward Moulthrop on April 2, 2001. The interview took place in Atlanta, Georgia, and was conducted by Mary Douglas for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Philip Moulthrop [Edward's son] and Mary Douglas have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MS. MARY DOUGLAS: Interviewing Ed Moulthrop at the artist's home and studio in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 2[, 2001], for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Ed, maybe we could start by asking you when and where you were born.

MR. ED MOULTHROP: Well, believe it or not, I was born in Rochester, New York, but I only lived there half a year. So my father and family, I think, moved to Cleveland, Ohio, then. Oh no, they moved to Erie, but they only lived there half a year. So, even though Cleveland is my home through most of my life or early life, I still have to say that I was born in Rochester.

MS. DOUGLAS: And that was what year?

MR. MOULTHROP: That would have been 1916.

MS. DOUGLAS: And so, you moved to Cleveland shortly thereafter.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, probably 1917.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, maybe you could describe what your childhood was like in Cleveland growing up?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, my father was an architect, and so we lived in a suburb of Cleveland. And then later I went to Western Reserve University, which is in Cleveland; it's now called Case Reserve [Case Western Reserve University]. And I was interested in architecture, so I took an architecture course, and all the engineering we had to take, which is a lot of your time, I took at Case anyway. So far as I was concerned, it was already Case Western Reserve.

MS. DOUGLAS: Did you have siblings?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I had two brothers, one of whom died, and the other one lives in Cleveland still. So Mae and I visit Cleveland once a year, at least, and get a chance to see – my brother, and her brother still lives in Cleveland, so we do get to visit both of them.

MS. DOUGLAS: And Mae is sitting here with us in the interview, your wife. And she may talk some, too, and have some things to say.

MS. MAE MOULTHROP: All right. [Laughs.]

MS. DOUGLAS: So, were either one of your brothers artistic, or do things –

MR. MOULTHROP: – No, I don't – my father was because he was an architect and used to make perspective views of buildings and houses he designed. So I suppose I was greatly influenced by that, but I do remember that when I was eight years old, my uncle gave me a pocketknife, and I was always carving animals, and figures, and people out of wood sticks. So I've done woodwork, you know, since the beginning. And wood has always been one of my favorite materials. In fact, I say, when I gave a more formal talk, that wood is the most exquisite of all materials, and that means gold or diamonds and silver. Gold is lovely, but wood's even better. [Laughs.] So, if you feel that way, then wood is a natural.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about in high school? Did you take art in high school?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I didn't take art. Our high school didn't have art classes, I don't think, and I never took art in high school.

MS. DOUGLAS: It must have been interesting in a home where your father was an architect.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, he was real good at making architectural drawings and sketches of houses and buildings, things like that. I'm sure that greatly influenced – but he was not very good at using tools, like chisels and screwdrivers and things like that. He was just a pure architect.

MS. MOULTHROP: But your mother was good –

MR. MOULTHROP: My mother used to do repairs –

MS. MOULTHROP: Repairs. [Laughs.]

MR. MOULTHROP: – on everything, and changing light bulbs or fixing wiring. [They Laugh.] She would do all that. And so I learned a lot about that, but I continued to do wood carving, because I had a natural affinity for wood. And I continued to do wood carving all the time I was in high school. And then when I was about 16 or 15, I saw an article in a magazine about a wood lathe, but, of course, in those days, they didn't tell you anything about how to use it or what you did with it – you know, step one, two, and three. But I sent away – I remember it was $15 or $18, which was a lot of money for a kid in high school then. And I delivered magazines to earn the 20 bucks, and then I sent away for it. And that was the first lathe I had, and it was a wood lathe –

MS. MOULTHROP: Tell how it came.

MR. MOULTHROP: It came knocked down, with no directions on how to put it together or how to use it, nothing like that.

MS. DOUGLAS: That would have been around 1932, then, when you were 16.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, that would have been 1931, something like that. And then I went to high school in Cleveland, or it was really Cleveland Heights. And after architecture college, I decided I would go to graduate school, and I had a scholarship to Princeton graduate school, and so I went there. But at Princeton, graduate school was all architecture, and I didn't do much of anything with woodworking, because I didn't have a workshop or any place for tools.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, I'm curious – I know from being in high school, where you were carrying on your wood carving and working on the lathe at home, did you ever think of pursuing that as an occupation?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, there was no way. I didn't consider it an occupation until more recently, when I quit being an architect. And that's when I never thought I would run it as a business, you know, for full-time living.

MS. DOUGLAS: I guess your father influenced you a lot, then, to go into architecture.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, my father probably influenced me to go into study architecture, because that was what I had seen going on around me, is the architecture. And in those days, that would have been 1930, I think the crafts, like wood turning and woodworking furniture, weren't well-known, and you couldn't have made a living if you had wanted to. In fact, I think in the early '30s, it was the rejection of hand – America was in a rejection period of handmade things. And it was like – I know that they used to laugh at Tiffany and his designs. And, of course, now we know that they're wonderful examples of crafts. But in those days, I think everybody rejected that sort of thing, and crafts were not in.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, how did that relate to the schools of architecture being taught? Because hadn't someone like Frank Lloyd Wright embraced the, sort of, William Morris ideal of the architect embodied in the crafts?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, only a few architects did, Frank Lloyd Wright and the Greene Brothers [Charles Sumner Greene and Henry Mather Greene] in California, and some others pushed modern craft in woodworking. By then, of course, Frank Lloyd Wright did that so much. But he was very unusual. The average architect never used any crafts in his work, because, first of all, it wasn't popular in those days.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, I figured out why crafts – I was trying to figure out how this could happen. And in those days, if you wanted something, you bought it.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, machine-made things were the in thing – the de rigueur. So, if it were machine-made, that made it wonderful. And, of course, now we're back again where people are delighted to see something that has the feel of being handmade.

MS. MOULTHROP: And I tried to figure out how this happened. And I finally realized what happened was that people grew up, and their families had things handmade – well, they necessarily weren't handmade, but they were, maybe, furniture – but they couldn't afford it, so they decided that they would learn how to do it

themselves. And that's when the craft movement took off.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, but that wasn't until 1965 or so –

MS. MOULTHROP: Oh, yeah, that was –

MR. MOULTHROP: Much later. When I was in school, of course, architecture teaching was different than it is now. We had, in architecture, a watercoloring course, a life drawing course, a sculpture course, and the teachers were real sculptors and watercolorists, and so forth, but that was typical of all architecture schools. Now, they don't do that anymore.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, was that when you were at Western Reserve or Princeton?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, when I was at Western Reserve and at Princeton. At Princeton, they didn't have the actual instructions, like in watercolor, but they had teaching courses where the art teaching was a very important part of the architecture course.

MS. DOUGLAS: Who were some of your teachers that you remember at Western or in architecture school?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, the head professors at Western Reserve were architects, well-known local architects from Cleveland; and at Princeton, though, we had architects – they had visiting critics like Alvar Aalto from Finland, and they had the one, the architect who designed all the screens, the well-known one in the U.S., and they had visiting professors, but they were all architects, and they didn't have any – but I did painting, watercolor. I, of course, did not have access to a woodshop, so I did architectural things. And in the Princeton years, I didn't do any, really, any painting either, except architectural perspectives and so forth.

MS. DOUGLAS: Let me go back to the lathe you mentioned that you got when you were 16. What kinds of things were you making on it?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I made smoking stands, and dishes, and planters, which I gave away for Christmas presents to everybody. [Laughs.] Everybody that was a relative had some kind of wood-turned object from me.

MS. DOUGLAS: What kind of wood did you start out using?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I think I didn't know where to get wood in those days, so I used to have to go over to a lumberyard and get the walnut, or cherry, or something like that to work with. And now, I use – of course, gradually, later, I realized that you can work with logs, that you can obtain more readily, and that's what I do now.

MS. MOULTHROP: But that's after the government invented something.

MR. MOULTHROP: Oh, yeah. Well, of course, the problem with working with a log is they crack, and they open up, and I would say a normal bowl would crack and open up maybe four or five inches, which is impossible to mend. So I was looking for some way of treating wood so that it wouldn't crack. And I read this article in Popular Mechanics magazine about the government was doing a huge project to speed up the drying of walnut gunstocks.

MS. MOULTHROP: They were making thousands for World War II.

MR. MOULTHROP: It was World War II, and they needed – and between the World Wars, I think – and they needed thousands and thousands of them. And the problem they had is they would carve them out on machines, but then they would warp and crack, and they lost a big percentage of them. So they said, "We'll do a research project," and they must have spent a lot of money. And they came up with polyethylene glycol number 1,000, except they just did it with walnut.

MS. MOULTHROP: And tell what it does.

MR. MOULTHROP: And if it is sort of – you mix it with water, and it's sort of a waxy substance, and you soak your pieces of wood in it, and they should dry without cracking. And so, as a result of this, I have used the polyethylene glycol treatment all along, ever since. Every piece I do, whether it needs it or not, I automatically soak it in polyethylene glycol.

MS. MOULTHROP: And tell about the government kind of polyethylene glycol.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, of course, the sad thing is the government designed and spent all of this money on walnut gun stock, but then the army and all the services changed over to fiberglass gun stocks, and so all the walnut was wasted. But not on me, because I was delighted. And I found out that cherry and oak and all of them

had different soaking times.

MS. MOULTHROP: Trial and error. Everything was trial and error.

MR. MOULTHROP: And I had, at that time, a lot of tanks. And at one time I had 12 tanks that were about 30 inches high by 4 feet in diameter, and I had them full of liquid and all of them gradually built up. And I would soak the bowls. What you do, in general, is you take a log and turn it on the lathe, so it's about one-inch or an inch-and-a-half thick at most, and then you soak it in the bath, in a tank of polyethylene glycol. And if it penetrates, then you can dry it real fast, like in a drying room or in the sun, and it doesn't crack, and it dries just perfectly.

MS. DOUGLAS: When you say soak it, what time are we talking about?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, the average soak for the easiest wood was tulipwood, tulip poplar wood, which I think I allowed to soak two months. But then, oak and hickory, I noticed took, like, six months. So, generally, I avoided oak and hickory, because they tied up the tanks, being full of other woods. And with the six-month soak, it was too long. Incidentally, this polyethylene glycol is polyethylene glycol number 1,000. They have, in the chemical market, all kinds of polyethylene glycols – 800, and 600, and 400, and 200. But the 1,000 seems to work better.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, this might be jumping around a little bit, but when you're describing this technique that you developed – you said it was before the war, right before the Second World War – so, at that time, you were practicing architecture here in Atlanta, at that point.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, no.

MS. DOUGLAS: Or you were teaching.

MR. MOULTHROP: The reason I came to Georgia – to teach architecture. And I did teach architecture at Georgia Tech [Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta] for ten years, but Georgia Tech was just starting the industrial arts program. And they had a lovely shop, which I used to use myself, just for fun.

MS. MOULTHROP: And they didn't teach any kind of humanities at Georgia Tech then.

MR. MOULTHROP: No, Georgia Tech was an engineering school. And, of course, you didn't get any, like art history, or watercolor painting, or sculpture, or anything like that.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you graduated from Princeton and took the teaching job at Georgia Tech.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you were teaching architecture only, or were you teaching industrial arts also?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I taught architecture, except during the war, they were desperate for physics teachers, and I loved physics all through school and was pretty good at it.

MS. MOULTHROP: And minored in it, didn't you?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yes. So I had a minor in physics. So I taught physics for a while, too.

MS. MOULTHROP: Which is why he wasn't drafted, because they had a big program – well, a V-12, navy V-12 program in which they came, had him go around to different schools, you know. And then the army had the same kind of thing, and so they all had to take physics, and they needed the physics teachers very much.

MS. DOUGLAS: So at the time you were developing this technique of using the polyethylene glycol, is that when you were teaching at Georgia Tech? I'm just trying to get the time.

MR. MOULTHROP: No. [Moulthrop began to use polyethylene glycol about 1959.]

MS. DOUGLAS: I'm trying to get a sense of if you kept doing all your woodworking on the side.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I did, by using the industrial arts shop, which had machinery, and lathes, and band saws, and all kinds of things. And I was able to use that shop, and all the time I did, but not like I do now, not a full-time business, because I was teaching full time.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, I'm trying to get a picture of you, you know, pursuing architecture as a career and being employed in it full time, and being kind of consumed with that field, and then at that same time you're pursuing a second career, sort of, as a woodworker.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, you almost had to do that. Woodworking and crafts, in general, weren't recognized, I don't think, until 1950 or 1960.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, what motivated you to continue pursuing it?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, as I said earlier, I love wood, and if something's made out of wood, that was all it needs to be, and I love it.

MS. MOULTHROP: And he likes to work with his hands.

MR. MOULTHROP: And I just like to work with wood and with my hands. So, I did that, but not at the volume I now do.

MS. DOUGLAS: Did you have colleagues that worked in wood also that you interacted with?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I didn't have anybody to interact with.

MS. DOUGLAS: You didn't know any other wood turners.

MS. MOULTHROP: Nobody was turning wood then.

MR. MOULTHROP: No. And I remember the first crafts were really glass, I think, and ceramics. But I did know several ceramics people that were experimenting with beginning uses of ceramics and modern design. And I used to talk and discuss with them, but I'd say you could not have made a living with the crafts then anyway.

MS. DOUGLAS: What were you doing with the pieces you made during that time?

MR. MOULTHROP: Oh, the pieces I made during that time, I don't think I have even one left. I gave them away to friends and people I know.

MS. MOULTHROP: And relatives. [Laughs.]

MR. MOULTHROP: And relatives.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were there any opportunities to exhibit the work, or did you think of yourself as exhibiting?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, there wasn't any museums. Museums never showed crafts, ever. They had paintings and sculpture, period. It wasn't until 1965, I think, that museums started showing crafts as an art object.

MS. DOUGLAS: And how did you become aware of that?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I always loved visiting museums, so wherever I was, I visited museums in Washington, or New York, or Cleveland, or Atlanta. The Atlanta museum also was this – I knew the people there pretty well, but they were not interested in craft exhibits until later, you know, about 1965, I think.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, to get my chronology right, how long did you teach at Georgia Tech?

MR. MOULTHROP: Six or seven years.

MS. DOUGLAS: So it would have been around what year when you finished there?

MR. MOULTHROP: That would have been about 1948, I think.

MS. MOULTHROP: It was in the '70s that everything changed.

MS. DOUGLAS: Because you started there [Georgia Tech] right after Princeton.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I started Georgia Tech in 1941.

MS. DOUGLAS: I was getting confused about the research on the polyethylene.

MR. MOULTHROP: The research was done when the U.S. government realized they needed monster quantities of walnut gunstocks.

MS. DOUGLAS: That was done prior to World War II.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, it was really prior.

MS. DOUGLAS: So [around 1948] you finished at Georgia Tech.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I finished there, and, of course, crafts were not well-known or even desirable, so you couldn't make a living with crafts, so I was an architect for a number of years in Atlanta.

MS. DOUGLAS: Where were you working?

MR. MOULTHROP: My main – I worked for Richard Aeck, and then I got a better job as chief designer for Robert and Company, which did bigger projects, including Washington, D.C.

MS. MOULTHROP: They were architectural engineers.

MR. MOULTHROP: And they were, perhaps, more engineering, but I supplied the non-engineering things that they needed, like design, and modern look, and so forth.

MS. MOULTHROP: And one of the things he designed when he was there was an addition to the Library of Congress.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, one of the last jobs I had was working for Robert and Company, was the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. And that was exciting because I got to see the museums in Washington. But I have to admit that in these years I didn't do too much wood turning. I did a little bit all the time and I think I gave all the pieces away.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, one of the reasons you didn't is that you went up every week to Washington, DC.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I commuted from Atlanta to Washington–

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A.]

MR. MOULTHROP: I didn't have much spare time – a little bit. And I was experimenting with a newfound polyethylene glycol, and so I'm sure that encouraged me to experiment more and try different things. And then, because I was an architect, I naturally thought in terms, perhaps, of larger things, so that's what I started doing – large, huge vessels that were more architectural. And that's when I did some of these huge vessels.

When I was teaching at Tech, I learned that you could turn a full log on a lathe, and you could turn it down to a one-inch thickness, and then it would soak in the polyethylene glycol quicker. You have to remember that in this day, at that time, you could not make a living doing woodwork or any kind of handwork. There were an occasional person that did, but they were so unusual. Like one of the architects were Frank Lloyd Wright and the Greene Brothers, they –

MS. DOUGLAS: You mean their furniture design.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, in furniture and house building – house handmade-looking designs. But they were not typical kind of things. And so, in the years after that, I think you do mainly earn enough money to live on, and that's your main objective, at least mine was.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, it sounds like you were starting to really make progress with your work, doing these big pieces on the lathe.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, I learned how to do it occasional, and I used to do on the weekend occasional big piece, and then I would learn a lot about the large size, using a full log. And with the polyethylene glycol, you could do full log sizes without worrying about cracking.

MS. DOUGLAS: I'd hate to go into a technical digression, but let me ask you to describe what the polyethylene glycol does to the wood?

MR. MOULTHROP: It prevents the wood from splitting, and it alters the cells of the wood so they're more flexible, which you could guess anyway. And so, I can't give a real good answer to that. [The wood soaks in a tank of water and polyethylene glycol (PEG), an inert water-soluble wax. The PEG penetrates into the surface of the wood and about 1/8 inch of the wax stays in the wood, filling the cells so that they don't shrink and cause splitting.]

MS. DOUGLAS: Does it make the wood feel different?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, you can't tell. I don't think a top woodworker now or a cabinetmaker could tell any difference between something that was soaked the right length of time. If you soak something too long, it gets a little waxy. But I suspect that the wood that has been soaked is a little easier at turning, because I think the polyethylene glycol acts as a lubricant for the chisel when it cuts.

MS. DOUGLAS: So it doesn't polymerize –

MR. MOULTHROP: No, it doesn't. Yeah, there are ways, and I did experiment with those, of polymerizing chemicals that you soak in wood, but that makes the wood entirely different feel from the wood that is in polyethylene glycol. It's pretty natural feeling. And, as I say, even the best woodworker probably couldn't tell if it was soaked, whereas the polymerized ones, I knew a man here in Atlanta who polymerized things with a Lockheed reactor, and subjected it to rays from the reactor to harden it. And it was really hard wood, but I like real natural wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: So I'm wondering when did you start thinking that your woodworking was really coming along, and you were real pleased with it?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I was happy with it, I'd say, about halfway through my professional career as an architect. And I had been an architect for 45 years, and it was when I quit that – and I quit because I felt by then, crafts would really make a living. With wood turn, you could sell them and make a living, but you could not have done it earlier. Everybody says, "Don't you wish you had stopped ten years earlier?" But I say, "No, you couldn't make a living in turned wood then."

MS. DOUGLAS: I guess I'm trying to distinguish between your own assessment of your work versus a market existing for it – like when you were thinking, "Oh, I really like what I'm doing here, artistically or technically. I think I'm really getting somewhere with my work," versus thinking, "I could make a living off of it." Or do you see that as being the same thing?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, more or less, I had always been interested in the craft field. And we knew in Georgia – potters and metalworkers and other –

MS. MOULTHROP: Glass.

MR. MOULTHROP: And glassworkers. And we could see that nobody could make a living, and you have to do that. I knew I needed to do that.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, we had four sons, so we had to make a living. [Laughs]

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, we did, yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: But it sounds like you were pursuing woodworking just for its own sake.

MR. MOULTHROP: Oh, there wasn't any doubt about it, because I didn't get paid at all. Everything I made in those days, when I was an architect full time, I gave away to somebody, and I don't think I even have any right now.

MS. DOUGLAS: Oh, wow, I bet you wish you had it now.

MS. MOULTHROP: You know the Signature Shop [The Signature Shop & Gallery, Atlanta, GA] here in town?

MS. DOUGLAS: Uh-huh.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, Ed sold his first bowl at the Signature Shop.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, that was later. Maybe I'd been an architect for 20 years.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, anyway, he sold it for $25. And that was so much money then that we went out and celebrated and had dinner and money to spare. [Laughs.] We were so excited about it.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I remember the early days, we used to sell at the Signature Shop in Atlanta – was the only shop that had modern ceramics or modern anything.

MS. MOULTHROP: And modern crafts. It's the oldest continuously operating crafts shop in the United States.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, and Blanche Reeves, who was the owner, who was a wonderful teacher, was so dedicated to crafts, you wouldn't believe it. She was just something. And she taught everybody about crafts, whether they wanted to know it or not. [Laughs.]

MS. DOUGLAS: So, she was a real advocate.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, she was.

MS. MOULTHROP: And a character, a real character.

MR. MOULTHROP: So that's probably the first time I marketed any crafts, at her shop.

MS. DOUGLAS: What year would have that been?

MR. MOULTHROP: That would have been 1965, something like that.

MS. DOUGLAS: What was the crafts scene like in Atlanta, at that point?

MR. MOULTHROP: It was more or less nonexistent. The museums still didn't show any crafts.

MS. DOUGLAS: But there must have been other artists showing at the Signature.

MR. MOULTHROP: There were potters and glassworkers.

MS. MOULTHROP: See, we found what happened is that the first things were pottery, and that developed, then came glass. And Ed said, "Well, wood's bound to be next." [Laughs.]

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I always felt that wood would have its day one of these times. I had watched as pottery had its day, and then glass had its day, and metalwork. And then, I think now it's time for wood. And I told a lot of people that wood will come in, and it did. And I was delighted to see that it did.

MS. DOUGLAS: When are we talking about here?

MR. MOULTHROP: Oh, 1975 I would say.

MS. DOUGLAS: So there started to be an audience for wood around the mid-'70s.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, and wood turning began when Albert Lee Coff –

MRS. MOULTHROP: Oh, yes.

MR. MOULTHROP: – started in Philadelphia, started wood turning.

MS. MOULTHROP: Workshop.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, a workshop. And he got the wood turners together for the first time.

MS. MOULTHROP: They came from New England and the East Coast.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, all over the United States. Up until that time, the only wood turner that was published ever was Bob Stocksdale, who is, by the way, a couple years older than I am. [Laughter]

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, that's another question. So, who were the other wood turners that you were aware of at that time?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, there was Bob Stocksdale – there was only about five wood turners, so I should be able to think –

MS. MOULTHROP: The man in Florida.

MR. MOULTHROP: Dale Nish was a teacher and a wood turner, and Rude Osolnik – that's three.

MS. MOULTHROP: The one who went to Florida.

MR. MOULTHROP: Oh, yeah –

MS. MOULTHROP: His son became more famous than he did.

MR. MOULTHROP: Mark –

MS. MOULTHROP: Lindquist.

MR. MOULTHROP: The Lindquist father [Melvin Lindquist] –

MS. MOULTHROP: L-I-N-D-Q-U-I-S-T

MR. MOULTHROP: – and son [Mark Lindquist] had done wood turning, but to make a living, they had to advertise, like, in Good Housekeeping magazine, and that sort of thing, to sell any of their turned things.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, did you meet all these people when you went to that convention?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yes, I met them for the first time up in Philadelphia at Albert Lee Coff's conferences on wood turning.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you remember what years those conferences were?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, that would have been 19 – when would that be, '75 or '76, '77, something like that.

MS. DOUGLAS: That must have been an exciting time to meet other wood turners.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, it was, yeah, for the first time, and there weren't anybody from Georgia or the South. And most of the wood turners were woodworkers who became wood turners later, after they were furniture makers.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, what about the one in Berea?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, that's Rude Osolnik. Well, lots of them were teachers of woodshops. At Berea College [Berea, KY], it was Rude Osolnik.

MS. MOULTHROP: In Kentucky.

MR. MOULTHROP: And at Brigham Young University, it was Dale Nish. And all of those people were hardened wood turners, and they worked in wood. And, of course, in my own life, when I quit architecture, I quit because I realized I needed the job and the money, but I realized that wood turning could be a profession. And museums started showing it, and the Mint Museum [Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, NC] had shows with actual wood turning in it, and some of the other museums. The Atlanta High Museum [High Museum of Art, Atlanta] showed woodworking, wood turning, and some of the others. And then, the American Craft Museum [now named Museum of Art & Design, founded 1956, New York, NY] started, and I guess they started in '70 or something like that. And, of course, they showed crafts and promoted them.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, what happened was also that individual areas, like Southeast, Midatlantic, and Northeast, and Midwest, and so forth, they each had their just organization, you know, and it just began by people getting together and writing letters to each other, and pretty soon they'd have an organization and an area, and then they would have meetings in the area. Then, after that, it really started to flourish. That was when the American Craft Council was organized and consolidated everybody into one big organization.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, then the American Craft Council in New York, and they had the American Craft Museum – all those added together to make all crafts succeed more. And it got to be a profession that you could actually make a living at.

MS. DOUGLAS: And just to reiterate, you retired from your architectural practice what year?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, when I realized that – it would have been 1975, I guess. Yeah, I think I just realized that it would be more fun to work in wood and do wood turning than to do architecture.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you were about 59 – at that point – years of age.

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I was probably older. I was probably 62 or 63.

MS. DOUGLAS: Really? And you had had to private practice prior to that.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, yes, when I quit Robert and Company, I told Mae, my wife, that it will take five years to get out of this and make wood turning make a living for us. But I did it in three years instead of five. [Quit Roberts and Company ca. 1969; had private practice as an architect until 1972.]

MS. MOULTHROP: Emory figured in just a little bit.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, no, that's just one of the clients I had – it was Emory University.

MS. MOULTHROP: One of your clients.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: So when you retired from Robert and Company, the idea was to start pursuing wood as a profession.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I didn't really retire; I just quit, because I thought it would be more fun, and I could

make a living doing wood turning. So that's what I did, and it happened faster than I thought.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, you were just talking a little bit about the Craft Council and the Craft Museum in New York. What kind of involvement have you had with some of the other craft organizations, like Penland School [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC], or Haystack School [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME], or Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN]?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I haven't had much acquaintance with them. I keep up with – I read all the articles about the schools. Arrowmont, though, is closer, perhaps, to us, and my wife took weaving at Arrowmont. And Arrowmont did not have, when I began going to Arrowmont with my wife, they did not have a woodshop then, and woodworking hadn't caught on. And woodworking came a little bit later after the other materials.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, have you taught wood turning on the lathe?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I don't. I have taught my son and a few individuals, but I've done teaching, you know, at Georgia Tech, as we said.

MS. MOULTHROP: Did you do any teaching at Arrowmont?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I didn't teach at Arrowmont, but they were the early ones who conducted some exhibits and shows. And I did exhibit in Arrowmont shows in those days, yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Maybe I could get you to talk a little bit more about teaching your son to become a wood turner.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, it's the funniest thing, my son was a lawyer, and I think a good one. And one day he came to his mother.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well listen, he was a lawyer, but he said, you know, "I could do lots of things, but I could never stand in front of a lathe and just turn out bowls all day long. That's something I couldn't do." So then, one day we were standing together, Ed and Philip and I, and Philip said – Ed was standing right there – and he said, "Do you think Dad would teach me how to turn, to do wood turning?" And I said, "Well, why don't you ask him yourself? He's standing right there." [Laughs] I never could figure out why he did that.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, how old was Philip at that time?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, he would have been 33.

MS. MOULTHROP: Yeah, he was in his 30s.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, could you describe a little bit how that – it sounds like an apprenticeship sort of?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, he started working for me because I was making good money in wood turning, and so he would turn things for me. He would do the rough shapes and then put them in the tank for me – the tanks of polyethylene glycol for me. And he did that for a year or so, and then he got so he could finish them, and I would show him how to do, because these were pieces for me to use in exhibits and sales. And that's how he learned, by working for me.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you said you had also taught a couple of other people.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yes, there was, well, more or less, I wouldn't say teaching at the lathe – I have taught my grandson, Matt.

MS. MOULTHROP: Philip's son.

MR. MOULTHROP: But Matt's away in college most of the time, so he's not a good subject for teaching.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, wasn't Philip the one that, when he started, you said you'd never saw anybody that learned so fast in your whole life?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, Philip learned very fast how to do it.

MS. MOULTHROP: Because he just had a natural aptitude.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, he did.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, so how was it working with your son?

MR. MOULTHROP: It worked fine. We worked here at my shop, but then he moved to Marietta. And when he built

his new house, he built his shop as a basement, and the entire basement floor made into a woodwork shop.

MS. MOULTHROP: And Philip is very organized, unlike Ed. And Philip has a place for everything and everything in its place in his shop.

MS. DOUGLAS: So is he pursuing that full time as a career?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, he was a lawyer, as I said, but then I didn't feel he should abandon the lawyer job, because he had two kids –

MS. MOULTHROP: That he had to put through school.

MR. MOULTHROP: That he had to put through college and the high expenses. And I thought he ought to stay as a lawyer longer, but one day, he said, "No, I'm quitting the law business." So then, I just let him. [They Laugh.]

MS. MOULTHROP: You let him – [laughs] – you couldn't do anything about it. He decided.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, this is a different tack, but have you done much traveling around the States or abroad that has influenced your work?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, of course, in architecture school I traveled abroad, as an architect, looking at architectural designs of cathedrals, and churches, and buildings, and I'm sure that all had a lot to do with my knowledge of design, because, at the same time, I would go to museums in Paris and London and Switzerland.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, what about the time we spent the summer at Fontainebleau?

MR. MOULTHROP: And one year, I went to Fontainebleau. I had a scholarship to study abroad, and for the three summer months I went to Fontainebleau. And there I did – of course, I had architecture classes, but they were stressing watercolor painting a lot, and I sure enjoyed that. So I spent a lot of time doing watercolor painting.

MS. DOUGLAS: I'm curious to know how your watercolor, the work you did with watercolor, relates to your woodwork?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I see a real relation, because watercolor is design, and architecture is design, and woodworking and wood turning, and what I'm interested, perhaps, the main thing is design, and less in technique. I'm really interested in the design of objects rather than the technique of making them.

MS. DOUGLAS: And when you say the design, are you referring to the form, say, in the woodwork?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, the shape and form of objects.

MS. DOUGLAS: It seems like a lot of your wood pieces, the form really allows the imagery of the wood to come out.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, that's because – yeah, I am interested in – wood is my main interest, and so, in my design, I try to make the wood show. Like at lot of times, I do some trophies for a golf club in North Carolina, and I make them extra thick to express the idea of wood rather than glass or metal. And so, I do that.

MS. MOULTHROP: He makes those every year for the same golf club.

MR. MOULTHROP: And so the expression of wood is something I'm really interested in. And so a lot of my pieces – of course, when you're a beginning wood turner, you want to show how wonderfully thin you can make everything, and that's fun, but once you get past that, which I think I am long past, then you don't worry about that. And I make things thick just because it feels more like wood, and it has a hefty weight to it.

MS. DOUGLAS: The other thing that strikes me about your wood artwork is that it's abstract, like painting and abstract expressionism, where the paint is the subject matter – like, you look at the material of the paint, the way it's globbed on the canvas or just the brush stroke itself, the act of painting. That's what I think of when I look at your wood, is that I'm looking at wood, the material.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah. Well, I'm interested in expressing the idea of wood and the logs from which they originate. In fact, I, a lot of times, say the bowls I do exist in the trunk of the tree. All you have to do is dig them out any way you can. And the fact I use the lathe is another method of digging.

MS. MOULTHROP: In his talks, he'll show a picture of a tree that he's drawing, and then he will show the wood bowl in the tree partly carved out, you know, as if it was there all the time, and all he had to do was bring it out. [Laughs.]

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, that kind of reminds me of the way Harvey Littleton used glass.

MR. MOULTHROP: He used glass to look like glass.

MS. DOUGLAS: Or the way glass moves when it's hot. And I was just wondering what other craft artists that you relate to in your own work?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, perhaps, Bob Stocksdale, one of the early turners, perhaps the earliest. His things use wood as wood, natural. And I use wood with greater thickness now, because I like the heft of the woodblocks that have some weight. In fact, the only, I would say, super original thing I've done is the doughnut bowls, which are little blocks of wood that are turned and have no precedents. Well, it's no wonder they have no precedents. You can't use them for anything.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE B.]

MR. MOULTHROP: – and that design is the thing that I'm interested in. And I think most craftsmen that grew up doing furniture have a tough time with design. I always maintain that you can learn technique in a couple days, how to turn, how to use the lathe and how to turn, or how to use the loom, or how to use a wheel for pottery – you can learn in a few days. But design, it doesn't come that fast. Design is an accumulation of all your knowledge about the looks of things and the use of materials. And how do you learn your way in design? You go to museums, and museums, and museums, and then you see different objects, and you gradually learn that way.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, how has your work changed as a result of your own perfection of design?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I wouldn't say it's changed any. It's influenced greatly by it. Early, as an architect, I think design was the thing I was always interested in. And in woodworking now, and wood turning, which I do now, design is the main thing I'm interested in.

MS. DOUGLAS: At the Mint Museum, we have the very, very large figured tulip bowl that's in the Mason Collection, and it's just probably the most exquisite piece in the collection, I think. I just wonder if you get to a certain point in your career where you just know what something's going to look like?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, you do. You don't have to make a drawing ahead of time; it's sort of in your head. And certain of the shapes, I think, were influenced by looking at museum collections of early Cretan and archaic Egyptian things.

MS. MOULTHROP: They look like they came out of a modern art museum.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, those kind of things influenced me.

MS. DOUGLAS: That one piece I'm talking about, it almost looks like a Japanese landscape painting – the abstract quality of the wood grain – and it just shimmers.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, tulipwood is a wood that I used a lot, because it cuts easily and nicely, and sands smooth, and you can get it in big sizes. The biggest diameter bowl I ever did was 40 inches, and it was the shape of the Mint Museum bowl, the same shape, but I mean it was monster. And that kind of tree does come that big, and it's already round if you use a tree trunk.

MS. DOUGLAS: Where is that piece now?

MR. MOULTHROP: It's in an office building in Atlanta, the Cousins office headquarters [Cousins Properties, Atlanta, GA], in the center of a big, round room on a pedestal.

MS. DOUGLAS: Maybe we could go back to talking about the woodworking field. Earlier, we were talking about how, in the mid-'70s, the market for wood turning picked up, and you were able to show in galleries, and museums were showing it. What do you think about what's happened in the wood turning field since then?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, what's happened now is wood turners have, if you've seen a modern wood turning exhibit, the wood turners use all kind of things –

MS. MOULTHROP: Embellishments –

MR. MOULTHROP: – and technique. And some wood turners even spray paint their wood, so you don't see the wood. And, of course, I wouldn't do that. I love the wood grain so much that I like to exploit it rather than to cover it. And the same thing goes for carving on wood. It's like a pearl; you wouldn't carve a face in a pearl, if you could, because the pearl already has a look to it that you couldn't improve on. And so, carving a face on a

pearl wouldn't make sense. And that's the way I feel about wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, what about the other aspect of what's happened in the field, and that's the huge audience for wood turning now, the popularity of it?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, yeah, wood turning has become real popular. This is not a new phenomenon. Actually, in 1900, or 1890 to 1900, the handcrafts were in favor for a while, and people did all the handcrafts, except wood turning was rather stodgy at that time, and none of it was really incorporated in modern design. The people had not been to enough archaic museums of Cretan and Egyptian and so forth as I have. So, the woodwork and design were rather Elizabethan or Victorian.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, there's something I wanted to say that I was going to say before. And you asked Ed a question. What he does when he gets the log on the lathe, he looks at the markings on the log and the coloration and everything, and then he decides what shape he's going to make it, after he does all that.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yes, you utilize the grain of the color, the streaks and lines in the wood in such a way as to enhance the form that you're going to do. So you really have to sort of see, more or less, what you're going to end up with before you decide to do it. And occasionally, on an unusually large piece, I will do a sketch of it in pencil first.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, in terms of the popularity of wood turning today, there have been three major wood turning exhibitions in the last few years, that I know of. The Mason Show [at the Mint Museum of Craft and Design, Charlotte, NC]–

MR. MOULTHROP: Oh, well, there's lots more than that.

MS. DOUGLAS: The one at the DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI], and then there was one that Martha Connell [Connell Gallery, Atlanta, GA] had something to do with. So, you know, as a curator, I think it's kind of amazing that there's this sort of synergy of interest in wood turning.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I think that's due to a lot of things, mainly organizations. I think everybody likes something that's organized, and so the woodworkers are more organized as a clublike kind of arrangement than the ceramists and the glassworkers.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, I don't know, the ceramics had a group way before anybody.

MR. MOULTHROP: They have the NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts], which is a national organization. But the woodworkers, I don't know, they just had certain people that were good at organizing, and with the promotion – Albert Lee Coff starting off – they got organized better, I think, than other professions.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, because he was so good.

MR. MOULTHROP: So now, wood turning is an everyday – everybody, even an accountant or a lawyer, they do wood turning just for a hobby at home.

MS. DOUGLAS: Yeah, I think it does have broad appeal as a hobby art, but it also has gotten a lot of esteem as museum art.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, it has, and I don't understand that, but I'm delighted to see it. [Laughter.]

MS. DOUGLAS: You don't understand it.

MR. MOULTHROP: Because I would not – I think I would still be an architect if the public hadn't, all of the sudden, taken a liking for wood turning.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, has the recent embracing of wood turning as a museum art, has that helped your career?

MR. MOULTHROP: Oh, yes, it helped tremendously, because I've shown in all kinds of museum shows and the American Craft Council in New York, yes. And it's why I'm able to stay with wood turning and not go back to architecture.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, you're probably being a little modest too, because I think your wood turning, in particular, has received – I mean, the question I guess I should be asking you is, how has your work been received?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, it's been well received every place I've shown. I sell things to make money, of course, at the Heller Gallery in New York. And, of course, the prices have gone up. They aren't like they were at the first show of The Signature Shop – 25 bucks.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, last fall – he sells at Gump's in San Francisco. Do you know Gump's department store? And he was scheduled to sell out there. And when we walked in, every piece was sold.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you do have dealers, then, that you work with.

MS. MOULTHROP: Just the museums.

MR. MOULTHROP: Anybody making a living in the crafts needs a dealer, because you cannot turn out pieces and then also promote the selling of them. It's just a big job.

MS. DOUGLAS: But is most of the work that you produce going to a dealer, or is it going for specific exhibitions?

MR. MOULTHROP: I would say most of the work I do goes to dealers, because you're talking about money. And occasional pieces I use at exhibits.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you've had the same dealers for quite a while.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I've had the Heller Gallery for 12 years, and I previously had The Hand and the Spirit Gallery in Scottsdale, Arizona, for 12 years. And I have had to quit them; they changed owners. It was a good chance to quit, and I could not produce that much material anymore.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you said Gump's.

MR. MOULTHROP: Gump's in San Francisco, yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about here in Atlanta?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, I have stuck with The Signature Shop, because I began with them 35 years ago.

MS. MOULTHROP: And that's the only place you've sold here.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, it's the only place in Atlanta that I sell.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, this is a redundant question, at this point, because we've touched on it – how has the market for American craft changed in your lifetime?

MR. MOULTHROP: Changed from impossible to, you know, possible. You can make a fair living now in crafts, and you never could before. There wasn't even – museums didn't show it, well, like the recent museums – are important. They authenticate your pieces. And if a museum shows in its shows to the average person that it's acceptable and good enough to buy – so the museum coverage is real important. But I remember in the early days, the museums never showed any crafts, much less wood turning. And I remember Jack [Lenor] Larson said – he was the leader of the American Craft Museum – and he said, "I never liked wood turning until I'd seen Ed's pieces – Ed Moulthrop's pieces."

MS. DOUGLAS: That's a wonderful compliment.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, that is. Yeah, he said, "I never liked wood turning." Well, it was pretty much, a Victorian thing.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, in other words, you were a modernist using wood turning.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I've always been a modernist.

MS. MOULTHROP: In architecture, too.

MR. MOULTHROP: In architecture, too. Yeah, it was the same.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, that sort of relates to this question. Do you think of yourself, as an artist, as part of an international tradition or one of a tradition that's particularly American?

MR. MOULTHROP: Particularly American. I don't think it's international. Wood turning has been done better than we could do it, I think, in China and Europe, northern, northeastern Europe, for a long time. But they lack the design that I can supply to wood turning.

MS. DOUGLAS: So this sort of synergy of wood turners right now, there's not really a foreign counterpart to it.

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I would say not. No, it's not an international movement.

MS. MOULTHROP: Oh, that made me think of something. We know a couple of turners in England, and they came over here, and they couldn't believe how popular wood turning was here. And it was selling. And they weren't selling their stuff. People weren't buying it there, you know. So that's American.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, wood turners in England have a tougher time than we do here, because they haven't elevated wood turning to an art.

MS. MOULTHROP: No, that's just a handcraft you did in your spare time, they still think.

MR. MOULTHROP: In England, people, when you say wood turning, they think of plates to put fruit on and so forth.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, your work has never been functional. Your wood turning has never been functional. Or has it?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I've never had to do functional woodturning, which the guys in England, like Ray Key in England is a well-known English wood turner, but he, to make a living, he has to make thousands of functional wood bowls for use for cereal or, say, used in the kitchen or something like that. And if I lived in England, I would be starving, because I couldn't sell the things I make.

MS. MOULTHROP: He came over here and thought it was heaven.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, what community has helped you develop as an artist, then?

MR. MOULTHROP: I would say no community. There isn't any wood turning in – Florida seems to be – I think they have a lot of retired people in Florida that just love to have a hobby. And it's not true in this state, at least yet it isn't. But with the new movement in wood turning, it may become a hobby for everybody. I remember one time I used to, as an architect, design buildings for Emory University, and I got to know the president quite well. And he said to me one day, he said, "Ed, you know, I have to retire next year, and I'm frightened to death. I don't know what I'm going to do." And so, I said, "Well, do you like wood?" And he says, "Oh, I love woodworking." And I said, "Well, wood turning may be the thing for you."

So I helped him find a man that made a lathe for him, and he does wood turning all the time now, as a retired person. And, of course, he had no problem giving away: he has a list of backlog of people, acquaintances that knew him, that are waiting in line, hoping he'll have a piece for them.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, when he did that, he said to his wife, "Now, I'm going to do this wood turning, and don't you make any appointments for me any morning."

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, his wife, he said, "My mornings are wood turning, and you cannot schedule any morning coffees with people coming over to visit," and things like that. Isn't that wonderful? [Laughs.]

MS. DOUGLAS: It is.

MR. MOULTHROP: And he was a college president too. That was something.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, he – I guess, in some respects, I was wondering if you related to him because of his moving into a different occupation after he retired, from another one?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I don't think so. I think he was quite independent or a thinker person. And I think he liked the idea of a hobby as something to do. Wood turning is fascinating.

MS. DOUGLAS: But not as a profession.

MR. MOULTHROP: Not as a profession, no, I don't think.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, earlier, when I asked you if there had been a community that helped you develop as an artist, I see around your living room here, you've got George Nakashima and Sam Maloof in the room. And I think of them as being modernists that did woodworking, that applied modernism principles to woodworking. And I think that's very telling that you have their work in the rooms.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, there's Wendell Castle. That cherry wood chair there is a Wendell Castle too.

MS. DOUGLAS: And it's very Scandinavian-modern looking.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I think it is. And that's probably why I like George Nakashima's work; it's Scandinavian-looking and modern. Well, I think that's the influence of my education in architecture, was the design of modern things. And my heroes are designers of the modern idiom, like Alvar Aalto, and Frank Lloyd Wright, and –

MS. MOULTHROP: Frank Gehry.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, now Frank Gehry, whom, incidentally, I know.

MS. DOUGLAS: How do you know him?

MS. MOULTHROP: He worked for Ed. [Laughs.]

MS. DOUGLAS: No way – let me hear this. He worked for you.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, yes. I remember, I used to talk to him a lot, because I recognized he was an unusual kind of person. And I said, Frank, you know, this is a lousy place for you to work.

MS. MOULTHROP: That was when he was working at Robert and Company.

MR. MOULTHROP: I said, "We're sort of a stuffy firm, and you have these wonderful ideas." And he said, "Oh, I know that." He says, "I'm just working here long enough to earn my tickets back to L.A." [They Laugh.]

MS. MOULTHROP: Isn't that wonderful?

MR. MOULTHROP: And that's what he did. As soon as he earned enough, he got tickets and went back to L.A. and built his house there. And then, he's been famous ever since.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, your heroes in modern design, then, are –

MR. MOULTHROP: The Greene and Greene Brothers in California and Frank Lloyd Wright.

MS. DOUGLAS: And they've had an influence in your career.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yes, certainly, and definitely in my wood turning.

MS. DOUGLAS: And Greene and Greene. They designed furniture and houses.

MR. MOULTHROP: They designed houses with built-in furniture, much like Frank Lloyd Wright did.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about, in addition to other artists, what about movements or technological developments having an influence on your career?

MR. MOULTHROP: Probably the polyethylene glycol experiments are the main thing, because that enabled me to use larger pieces of wood that you can obtain, because you can't dry a piece of walnut, as big as some of the bowls I do, without getting cracks. No matter how you dry them, they just won't dry. You can slow the drying down, and it makes them look like they don't crack as much, but you can soak wood in oil, say, and it will apparently not crack, but it eventually will crack.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, have other wood turners taken advantage of your –

MR. MOULTHROP: Not too much. I don't especially recommend it for wood turners because it is so demanding, and it requires an organization. You have to have soaking tanks, and you have to have hydrometers to measure the density of the fluid. And things like that don't lend itself to a hobby type of thing.

MS. DOUGLAS: But the other professionals that are exhibiting as artists – this isn't necessarily something they use too, the polyethylene glycol.

MR. MOULTHROP: No, they generally use, like the colonial Americans, they did wood turning and woodcarving of bread bowls and things that were big. And you can use their methods, which was if you take a giant log and split it right down the center, you've eliminated 90 percent of the crack or the shrinking in the rest – the two halves. And then, if you carve something out of the two halves, it's not going to shrink and crack. And, of course, that's assuming to do a 40-inch bowl, which I did one time. It would take an 80-inch log, which is unbelievable, you know. You couldn't think you could do it.

MS. DOUGLAS: I know you've talked a great deal about wood, and that you loved wood, and what it means to you to use it as an artist. What do you think are the strengths and the limitations of that medium, of using wood?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, wood is probably attractive because it yields a little slowly. Clay, you may say pottery – the clay yields, maybe, too easily, because on wood, it really challenges you to really work with it. It's tough enough. And, of course, there's one thing that's interesting about wood. A piece of wood is always what it was, you know. Clay, you can move around, and it can be a round shape, and you can squash it and make it into a flat shape, and then make it back into a round shape. And wood, you can't do that. It has enough limitations to

make it a real challenge. And I think that's why hobbyists love wood to work in.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you think wood has any special significance as an art medium?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I don't think so, except, of course, I personally think of wood as the most wonderful of materials. I like it better than other materials, but I don't think it intrinsically has anything. The metals, of course, the wood, like I show in that one diagram – whatever you make out of wood was always there. You don't change its shape, like you would in metal – you melt it, and pour it into mold, and so forth.

MS. DOUGLAS: You mean that the grain in the wood remains the same.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, yeah, but even a piece of wood that remains the same as it was in the tree – the arm of a chair or the leg of a chair, or something like that – is still as it always was.

MS. DOUGLAS: I think from looking at your work, it's obvious you like to bring out the natural qualities in the material.

MR. MOULTHROP: Oh, yeah, that's my main objective is to make wood like wood, or feel like wood. And that's why I make a lot of mine real heavy, is because they have some weight to them. Whereas, you can make it thin and light as an eggshell, but it wouldn't have the feel of wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: Who were some of the younger wood turners –

[END TAPE 2, SIDE A.]

MR. MOULTHROP: Let's see, Al Stirt, S-T-I-R-T, – younger people who are making progress in wood turning. But I think the work that Albert Lee Coff did at the Woodturning Center in Philadelphia was an aid to the development of wood turning and the expansion of the organization that it is.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, you're talking about, he was organizing these conferences and workshops.

MS. MOULTHROP: Who are you talking about – Albert?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, Albert Lee Coff. The wood turners had never known each other, or I never met Bob Stocksdale, and I'd read about him in a magazine, only one magazine.

MS. DOUGLAS: Which magazine was that?

MR. MOULTHROP: I can't even remember what it was, but it was the first time I remember ever reading about somebody doing wood turning.

MS. DOUGLAS: Speaking of magazines, have any other magazines been important to help you learn about the fields or other –

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, they had the magazine called Fine Woodworking. At first, it was the only magazine on woodworking, and now there may be 50 of them. And then, there was just one. So, if there was anything in wood, it carries a measured amount of wood turning. But, it has, I understand their problem: they have to appeal to furniture makers and all these others, so they have to cover anything. But it was the first magazine that ever did an article on wood turning.

MS. DOUGLAS: Fine Woodworking.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah. And, in fact, it was the only woodworking magazine on furniture, and now there are hundreds of them, I mean really, just a proliferation of them.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you consider your most important works that were commissioned?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, ones for museums. I've done several for museums that were commissioned and several for office building lobbies and so forth like that.

MS. DOUGLAS: I know you have work in some very impressive private collections. Those may not have been commissioned, but –

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, they were probably not commissions. A lot of those were at the shows that I have at the commercial galleries. Sometimes, my very best work is there, and people buy them and use them in lobbies and so forth.

MS. DOUGLAS: So there's really not much difference between commissioned work and your other work.

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I would say not. The commissions are, let's say, less often, because if a person wants some of my work, they can buy it at a gallery. Of course, they pay more for it, but if they want it, they can buy it. [Laughs.]

MS. DOUGLAS: I mean, has anyone ever come to you and brought you a specific piece of wood and asked you to make a piece out of it?

MR. MOULTHROP: Only in a small way. A lot of time, people will bring me a piece of walnut and say, "Oh, this was a tree my grandfather planted outside our farmhouse in somewhere, and can you make a bowl out of this?" So, I've had some of those. And I did the biggest bowl ever – the biggest diameter was a 40-inch ellipsoid that I did for a company in Atlanta. And they said they wanted it for their main lobby, which is a round, circular, big, huge, circular room, and right in the center they put this bowl. That's the Cousins Building, yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: Cousins Properties.

MS. MOULTHROP: Yeah, Tom Cousins, yeah, we know him. They've come over and bought bowls. They have lots of your bowls in their house.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, they do.

MS. MOULTHROP: Yeah, they're delightful.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you think are the similarities or differences between your early wood turning and your recent wood turning?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I don't think – I've gradually perfected the little nuances of the use of polyethylene glycol, perhaps. And I have learned how to achieve different kinds of shapes on the lathe, and those are things I've learned. But otherwise, I would say my designs are pretty much the same all along. Like the design of this doughnut bowl – I made it early, and I still make those.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about the ellipsoids? Were you doing those in the beginning?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I began by doing ellipsoids because it's archaic looking. And that's from studying things in museums. As my wife said, the archaic things are really the most modern-looking – you know, archaic Greek and Cretan and so forth are, perhaps, the most modern thing in museums. So now, when I go to a museum, I usually go to the archaic –

MS. MOULTHROP: If they've got one –

MR. MOULTHROP: – Hittite or Cretan section first and see what is there in the exhibit.

MS. DOUGLAS: This really huge piece that's in the room with us has a footed section that reminds me of a Scandinavian-modern form.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, yeah, it's a modern shape. I hate Victorian design, and so I think everything I do tries not to be Victorian-looking.

MS. MOULTHROP: Not to what?

MR. MOULTHROP: Be Victorian-looking.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, has your working process changed over time?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I would say not.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about the amount of time you spend in the shop or working alone?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, when I quit being an architect, then I could devote full time, so there was a big explosion of production then.

MS. DOUGLAS: That must have been a fairly dramatic change in your life.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, it was.

MS. DOUGLAS: I mean, you were before working only in the evening and on the weekends, and then, suddenly, you had to fill up 40 hours work.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, that's right. Well, I built my shop, and lathes, and tools.

MS. MOULTHROP: Yeah, he built it all himself practically.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you didn't build a shop until you retired from architecture.

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I didn't have any of those shops that I have now.

MS. DOUGLAS: Maybe you could talk just a little bit about the kind of shops that you did build onto the house, because they're part of the house.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, his office was one of the shops, wasn't it?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yes. What I did is I added spaces to the house. We have nine additions on the house. And each addition, I always told Mae that I wanted to do these additions without borrowing any money. And so, some are small and some are bigger, depending on our condition at the time.

And so, when I was first at home, I had an architect office, and I told Mae that I'd have to be an architect for at least five years, probably, to make enough money to live on, and the crafts would be second. But it took only three years to get so that I could make a living in the crafts.

MS. DOUGLAS: So then you, I guess what we were talking about before was how dramatic the change was from working part-time to working full-time.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, it was tremendous; I could do all these things I always wanted to do, that is, as Mae knows, I worked full time. Well, I don't do full time now.

MS. DOUGLAS: You've slowed down a little bit.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah.

MS. MOULTHROP: Yeah, he had to. [Laughs.]

MS. DOUGLAS: So, let's say before you slowed down, how many hours a week would spend in the studio?

MR. MOULTHROP: Oh, I'd say eight hours a day or 10 hours a day. And that would be 50 hours – no, 60.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you'd work on Saturday too.

MS. MOULTHROP: Oh, yeah; oh, yeah. He didn't work on Sunday though.

MS. DOUGLAS: Let's see. Why don't we take a break?

[Tape stops, re-starts.]

MS. DOUGLAS: This is Mary Douglas, interviewing Ed Moulthrop at the artist's home and studio in Atlanta, Georgia. We're continuing from yesterday's session. Today is April the 3rd, and this interview is conducted for the Archives of American Art.

Okay, Ed, you were going to talk a little bit about your search for unusual woods.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, one of the things that's been a lot of fun – and for a while, I thought I made the wrong decision, to restrict myself to southeastern woods. But then, it became obvious that the great glacier came as far as the northern line of Virginia, I think. And it extincted, with its mile-deep of ice – extincted all the vegetation north of that line. So, as a result, I think there are more species in the Southeast than anyplace else, certainly north of the Virginia line. But that restriction of southeastern woods only means I couldn't use any wood from Africa or South America. And I stuck to that, unfortunately, but I think it made up for by the fact of this great extinction from the glaciers.

And so, as a result, that's a lot of fun, is to search for unusual woods. And some of the unusual woods that I use are, let's see – American chestnut is extinct because of the chestnut blight that killed all the chestnut trees. And I still love the American chestnut. As wood turning, it's lovely wood, but you have to find it where bulldozers have dug a foundation for a house or a road or something like that, buried in the soil. And then, on the other hand, I have, perhaps, 20 years ago, I remember visiting the Smithsonian's collection of wood types in their wood collection. And they said that yellowwood is the rarest wood in the U.S. So I had a friend who helped me, and we eventually found, after 10 years, found some yellowwood. And I mean searching. We did tremendous searching for yellowwood, and we found some logs. It grows only in the mountaintops of Tennessee and Kentucky. And it's a tough wood. And let's say that's fun, finding a new wood, but it took 10 years of searching.

And then, another wood that's unusual is American mahogany. I was pretty sure that mahogany was a form of wood only, and then I ran into a man that knew about mahogany trees in the Florida Keys and Key West, and he promised to get me some mahogany logs. And he did. And so I use an occasional piece of mahogany, American mahogany, which you would think would be a foreign wood.

So I tell people that I don't use any foreign woods, and by foreign, I mean west of the Mississippi and north of the Mason-Dixon Line. And those are what I consider foreign woods. And that's why the mahogany was fun. I thought that was impossible, that we could ever use mahogany, because that's a tropical wood, and only in South America or the islands can you get mahogany.

And another wood is what's known popularly as – I call it ash leaf maple – box elder is the name I was looking for. All of it has a bit of scarlet in it. Even an average tree has, like, one dot, but I found that some of the occasional trees, like one log in 10,000, would have bigger areas of the bright scarlet, and so I searched for those. Searching for wood is a fun, exciting part.

MS. MOULTHROP: Well, one of the reasons of the scarlet – those trees have grown in swampy areas.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, once you find some box elder, or ash leaf maple, you can find more of them. And because I found the very best pieces of ash leaf maple, with lots of scarlet in them – I found it in swamp areas – so I concluded that the swamp water has something to do with the amount of red coloring. And I think it is lightning, as a swampy area makes a good ground for lightning. And I think that actually maple trees in a swampy area get hit by lightning more often, and that allows or makes an injury in the wood, and that's where the red occurs. It's not in the dead wood; it's in the living wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: What are the qualities that you're looking for in these woods?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I like to see the unusual patterns, like in the red, the ash leaf maple, I like to see lots of brilliant red in big areas. Proportionally, you see more of the red and less of the light tan that mostly is the background color.

MS. DOUGLAS: And I noticed you use a lot of tulipwood.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, tulipwood I use so much of it because it's available, and you can still find, around the Southeast, a few tulip trees, tulip poplar trees that are maybe six feet or five feet in diameter, which is unusual. The biggest bowl I ever did was out of tulip poplar, and it was 40 inches in diameter. But that means it took a log about 50 inches; by the time you round it out you lose some. And tulipwood, which is the tulip poplar – and I call it tulipwood for short – not to be confused with African tulipwood, which is a tropical hardwood. But the tulipwood turns nice and smoothly and sands easily, so that's why I use tulipwood a lot.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about, could you describe a little bit about all the different forms you've worked with?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, the shapes are all part of design. I think, in the overall picture, I'm probably a designer, is what I should call myself, because I'm interested in design, both in architecture and in wood turning. And the shapes that I use are ones that I like in design, I think.

MS. DOUGLAS: Could you describe some of the shapes?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, probably my most prevalent shape is what I call an ellipsoid, which is a sphere squashed down a little bit flattish, with a relatively smaller opening into the bowl. And some of them are squashed real flat, like that one there, and some are higher, like the one behind you made with ash leaf maple. But I think that and my doughnut bowl are my two favorites. The doughnut bowl was designed as a feeling sculpture, like sculpture for a blind person. And so, you're really just supposed to hold it in your hand and feel it. And it requires a high polish finish. And otherwise, it's a sculpture, or I quite often say, if you're a good Catholic, you know about worry beads. It's something you just hold in your hand and feel. And my doughnut bowls are similar, except they're wood.

MS. DOUGLAS: Can you describe it – because we're on tape here; people cannot see it – what it looks like.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, a doughnut bowl is a solid block of wood, and I also use them for samples of wood, because it's not just a thin layer of wood, it's a solid block with a slight dimple in the top. Instead of hollowed out, it's not hollowed out; it's a solid block.

MS. DOUGLAS: But you do have an indentation in the top, as though it were a vessel.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, there is a dimple in top, sort of like it's pressed in with your thumb. And otherwise, there are spheres and ellipsoids.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, there's a couple of big vessels out in your living room that are uncharacteristic from what I know, the great big open bowl.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I do occasionally do other shapes beside these, but these are my predominant ones. And I would say ellipsoids is the predominant or occasional – when they get to be higher, I call them spheroids. They're not exactly real spheres.

MS. DOUGLAS: The big open-bowl forms out in the living room, did you do those recently?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, of course, when you're learning to do wood turning, and I was one of the first people to do giant-size bowls, naturally it's a lot easier to design an open bowl, like a salad-bowl-type shape, than it is the ellipsoids and spheroids that I like better. And so some of the early work had a lot of open, I guess you'd call them salad bowl, except they're three feet across and 40 inches.

MS. DOUGLAS: That may lead into another question about – I know you've made your own tools.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I make my own tools because the average machinery company that sells woodwork machinery doesn't anticipate anybody doing as big log pieces as I do. So I had to make my own tools, which hollow out – the spheroids and ellipsoids are hollowed out from a relatively small hole on top. And the market does not have strong enough or big enough tools to do that, so I knew I had to make my own.

MS. DOUGLAS: So the opening in one of your big ellipsoids might be, looking at these bowls, maybe four or five inches.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, the opening in top is relatively smaller. I think it generally has to be large enough to get your hand through it with sandpaper, so you can sand the inside.

MS. DOUGLAS: And then you're removing most of the material inside this vessel.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, yeah, the ellipsoid and spheroid shapes are relatively thin. And as I said before, I probably make them thicker than Bob Stocksdale or some of the others, because I like them to have enough heft so they feel like wood, with some weight to them. And the opening on top is maybe five inches or four inches. I make it big enough so I can get my hand in with a piece of heavy sandpaper.

MS. DOUGLAS: But how much material are you removing out of one of these pieces?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I would say the spheroids or ellipsoids represent maybe 90 percent of the weight. Wood is removed from the piece of log, in how I got the bowl.

MS. DOUGLAS: I guess for the lay person, it would look like an impossibility to do what you do, because to describe for people that can't see these – like you have a bowl here that's maybe 20 inches in diameter, and then the hole at the top is about four inches across. So you have to get a turning tool in there to –

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, a straight line, like a turning tool, theoretically, will reach every point of the inside. But the turning tools have to be long enough to get leverage against the cutting power of the lathe. So some of the tools are maybe eight or nine feet long, and you don't need all that to reach into the bowl, but you do need it for leverage to hold it down.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, you also designed your own lathe.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I originally – of course, none of the lathes on the market are designed for what I wanted to do. So I knew, originally, I had to design and build my own lathe, specifically for large logs and fairly large pieces.

MS. DOUGLAS: How did you know how to build your own lathe?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, of course, architects are well trained in engineering and strength of materials, and I think the architectural training I had helped a lot in my being able to make – design my own lathe.

MS. DOUGLAS: Could you talk a little bit about the finish that you put on the pieces? We hadn't discussed that.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well the finish, I don't tell people how I do the finish because I spent 20 years designing the finish. I didn't want to make bowls that required a daily or weekly refinishing by hand with wax or something.

[END TAPE 2 SIDE B]

MR. MOULTHROP: So I used a permanent finish that the fingerprints will not show in, and that's what I use. It's a

finish that will not show fingerprints, or at least you can wipe them off easily. So it's permanent. I knew I had to make a permanent finish, because I knew nobody would maintain anything that wasn't permanent.

MS. DOUGLAS: You mean like an oil finish on furniture.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, like oil finish on furniture. To be really correct, you should re-oil it once every month. Well, if a person owns 20 pieces, they're not going to re-polish it every month.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you ever have to do maintenance on pieces that people own – they send them back to you?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, they don't need to. They can polish it with terry cloth. And the kind of finish I now use, that took me 20 years to develop, is such that just a terry cloth will restore it back to original look.

MS. DOUGLAS: To jump back a little bit, could we talk a little bit about when you built your studio, when you designed and built your studio, and how it's fitted into your house?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, my house, as I said before, was an old, beat-up farmhouse that I bought because it was outside in the country. And I knew I was an architect and could add to it if necessary. And so, I added to the house. In fact, I have nine additions, and I decided I wouldn't do any additions unless I paid cash for it, and I wouldn't borrow any money. So some additions are small and some are big. The nine additions it's had will probably reveal my ups and downs financially. [Laughter.]

MS. DOUGLAS: Your studio you built at what point in your career?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, soon after we bought this farmhouse, I first knew I had to do turning, and I had my lathe outdoors just with a canvas over it. And I knew that wasn't satisfactory, but I had to do it. And then later, I added an actual workshop, and another workshop, and another, and another, and so forth. And these were originally, to make them functional, they originally, the workshops, each was a garage for a car. And then later, I enclosed the doors and made them into workshops.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now you have how many workshops?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, for wood turning, the way I do it, you need one separate workshop for wet wood, because you use the logs there when they're green and the air gets wet from the logs. And then, the finishing workshop has to be dry so finishes will dry. And so, I have really two workshops. And my son Philip, who started from scratch, knew also that he had to have two, a wet one, a wet workshop, and a dry workshop.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you also have some outdoor storage areas.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, yeah, the logs that I get from tree cutters, I had to store them when I bought them, so I used outdoor spaces, and I store them on hand so that at least one end stays damp, where it's in contact with the ground. And I theoretically was going to, and for a while I did, try this – put woodchips on top of the log so the sun wouldn't dry it out and it would crack.

MS. DOUGLAS: What is the relationship of your work and home life with having the studios in the house?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, of course, it's the ideal arrangement to have the studio and the workshops at home. Like, if you have five minutes to spare, you can work in the workshop five minutes. But if you have the shop remotely, it would be a big deal to utilize that spare time. In fact, you couldn't utilize that five-minute interval.

MS. DOUGLAS: I know that you started in woodworking later in your life, around retirement age, from architecture. So I'm curious to know how – well, I guess your children, at that point, would have been grown and out of the house.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, let's see, by the time I quit architecture, I think my children had long graduated, long ago graduated from college. So they were gone. Yeah, that's right.

MS. DOUGLAS: I was wondering what it would be like for them having you work at home, having their dad be a woodworker and an architect and working around them.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, they weren't here when I – my children were long gone and married and living in New Jersey and Chicago and other places. And by the time I quit architecture, I didn't have any children here, so I don't know what that would have been like.

MS. DOUGLAS: You always had a lathe set up then when they were growing up.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, I had a lathe even when we first moved in this old farmhouse. I had a lathe outdoors,

and my children were home then. I don't know what they thought about it. [They Laugh.]

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, speaking of when you retired, woodworking is really your second career. What was it like having a second career in the crafts at that age?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, of course, I never wanted to retire the American way, which is to move to Florida and sit on a porch and rock in a rocking chair. That never appealed to me anyway. I like to make things. So, when I quite architecture, I think I was desperately looking for something I could do all the time.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were any of your colleagues in the crafts field your age?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, there weren't any other architects doing what I did.

MS. DOUGLAS: Colleagues, craftspeople.

MR. MOULTHROP: No, well, no, most of the craftspeople were much younger, at this time, and all of the ones who wanted to make a living at crafts had to teach at a college.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about the craft organizations here in the area? Were you involved with any?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, there was, in Georgia, there was the Georgia Designer Craftsmen, was the name of the organization. And it had people who were craftsmen in jewelry, and glass, and metal, and everything except wood. I was, perhaps, the only wood person, because wood had not come to prominence then.

MS. DOUGLAS: Can you remember some of the craftspeople that were in that group that you worked with?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, there was Jerry Chappell, ceramics; Gary Noffke, a jeweler; and the glass was – I can't think of the name now –

MS. DOUGLAS: Ginny Ruffner.

MR. MOULTHROP: Ginny Ruffner, yeah, was a member. And she became since then very prominent in glasswork. And there were all the professions, except that I was the only woodworker in the group.

MS. DOUGLAS: One thing we talked about yesterday was when you were teaching at Georgia Tech as an architecture professor. I wanted to go back to that and ask you to talk a little bit about the teaching methods that were in architecture then, when you were a student and when you taught it, and how it's changed.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, the architectural teaching has been changed greatly due to the introduction of computers. Nowadays, there are computers that will draw perfect perspective views of things. And when I was first in school, and also when I was teaching architecture, you had to construct your own perspective, which was more or less and artist's kind of thing. And so you had to learn how to do watercolor painting, and sculpture, and models, and things like that yourself. And now they don't do that. They would never teach painting or, I don't think, any of the schools teach watercolor painting.

MS. DOUGLAS: You mean for architecture students.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, for architecture students.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you said you had studied at Western Reserve. You were taking those classes.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, that is way back, yeah, at Western Reserve. That was about 1938 when I was there. And in those days, architecture school meant you took watercolor painting; you took sculpture; you took art history and things like that. I think they don't do any of the watercolor painting or sculpture.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you were a student at Western Reserve probably in –

MR. MOULTHROP: 1935 to 1939, I guess.

MS. DOUGLAS: And who were your art teachers at Case Western?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, we had art teachers, like watercolorists, from the Cleveland School of Art – used to act as teachers for us. And we had some of the best artists in Cleveland teach us how to do watercolors and sculpture.

MS. DOUGLAS: Did you study any craft?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I wouldn't say crafts at that time. This is 1939 – 8 – 7. The crafts were not approved of.

Really, they weren't accepted any, so you didn't do crafts in those days.

MS. DOUGLAS: Didn't you tell me earlier that you studied with Victor Schreckengost, though?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, one of the teachers, I think he was a sculpture teacher that I had in architecture school, was Victor Schreckengost, who's now retired long ago, but is considered one of the top artists in Cleveland. And he does sculpture in clay, and ceramics, and things like that. He's one of the top artists. But we had all our teachers, for the extraneous subjects, were that kind of person, the top artists of the time.

MS. DOUGLAS: So how did you teach at Georgia Tech?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, I wasn't the head professor or anything like that; I was just a down-the-line professor. And I taught architecture, like how to draft and build models. And I introduced the model making with a structure of using model two-by-fours and two-by-eights for rafters, and two-by-fours for studs. And I probably introduced that at Georgia Tech.

MS. DOUGLAS: You mean you were building full-scale models.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, they were not full scale; they were three-quarter-inch to a foot, so they were only one – what would that be – one-tenth of the size of a real structure. But you learned a lot about two-by-fours. But now, you don't even need to know how to draft, because they have machines, computer-driven machines, that draw lines, and draw perspectives, and draw everything for you.

MS. DOUGLAS: A couple of more questions. If I could get you to talk a little bit about some of the pictures here I see on your wall, with all of the different people that have come to visit you, like Jimmy Carter.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, one of the fun things of doing what I do is I have met people that I wouldn't meet in architecture or any other way. Jimmy Carter, I got to meet him because he's a woodworker himself, and he came by the studio. And Bill Clinton we met in Washington D.C., as the craftsmen were emphasized at the White House that Christmas time. And other times, I have met David Rockefeller and Prince Aga Khan, Princess Aga Khan, and numerous people like that. And that's part of the fun of doing something like this. But it only happened because crafts were in a prominent stage of publicity right then and there.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's very different from what you described earlier about the crafts.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, yeah, earlier there wouldn't have been any crafts, earlier, than say, in the 1960s. When I was going to college, crafts were nothing, and there wasn't the American Craft Council, and museums did not show crafts of any sort ever, except Louis XVI vases or something like that. But historically, they showed ancient crafts but not any modern crafts.

MS. DOUGLAS: Could you talk a little bit about some of the traveling you've done?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, of course, the only traveling I do is pretty much to shows, like when I have an exhibition and show, of which the pieces are for sale, and so it makes money for you – was like at Gump's in San Francisco, or the Heller Gallery in New York, or Chicago, or St. Louis, or all these places that we have visited. And Mae always goes with me, because she loves it. And I think all the travel I've done is to various places, and they're all connected with the craft business.

MS. DOUGLAS: Aren't you going to the Renwick Gallery this month?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, like Washington, D.C., one time we were invited to the White House at Christmas, and that's what's on these pictures where Bill Clinton and Hillary are there. And I am going to the – like this year, shortly I'm going to the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., to get an award for wood craftsmanship at the Renwick Gallery. And as an architect, I worked in Washington for a while, for about two years on the James Madison Memorial Library of Congress. It's the new Library of Congress. And I was an architect designer. But I got to visit the Renwick Gallery; in those days it was boarded up, and it has just become a craft gallery in the last 20 years, I would say.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have you traveled abroad?

MR. MOULTHROP: I have traveled abroad as an architecture student. [Also traveled to Europe several times from 1970-90.] I traveled to Italy and Fontainebleau in France. But, of course, that was in the time when architecture teaching was different. When I was in Fontainebleau, I had an excellent watercolor teacher, who urged us to work harder, and I did. And I learned a lot about watercolor painting.

Yeah, well, of course, the Moulthrop name is Danish, I would say, because one time we visited in Denmark, and Mae said, "Let's look up in the telephone book and we'll see if there's anybody, a single person named

Moulthrop, and we'll call on him." Well, we looked in the telephone book, and there were pages and pages of Moulthrops, almost as like the Smiths here. And so we gave that idea up. And so I have visited Copenhagen and Denmark, and it's mainly in that part of visiting Scandinavia that was part of my crafts life, I would say.

MS. DOUGLAS: That must have been exciting, though, if you're interested in modern design.

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, yes. As an architect, of course, I was always interested in Finnish and Scandinavian design. But they're no longer the world's leader in those things. The U.S. is, I would say, and Italy is certainly in the crafts, and like car design and furniture design, Italians are right up there. But I think the Scandinavian people dropped the ball. They were the world's foremost leaders in modern design in crafts, but they are no longer that. I think they quit. I think it's because of their tax system that killed their craft working. They used to be the world's leader in crafts, but they're no longer, obviously. The Italians are certainly ahead of them, and the Americans are ahead of both of the others.

MS. DOUGLAS: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about in terms of your work and career?

MR. MOULTHROP: No, I just repeat that wood is just such a lovely material. There is no other material that compares to wood. Of course, I don't need to apologize for it, so I won't say, in my own opinion. I just think wood is the greatest material there is. It has just the right amount of resistance to changing form, and it lends itself to cutting and shaping, whereas clay is too moldable, and metals that are molten and can be molted and put in molds – are a different approach to design.

MS. DOUGLAS: And looking at some of your sculpture, could you talk a little bit about the difference between your ideas in the sculpture and your turned forms?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, the sculptures are the same as the turned forms, in that they, I hope, they express the woodiness of wood. And that's what I think I liked about wood sculpture. So I used to always be doing at least one piece of sculpture a year. There's a lot more hourly work required with sculpture than there is in a turned bowl.

MS. DOUGLAS: Okay, well, I think we'll take a break here.

[Tape stops, re-starts.]

MS. DOUGLAS: We have a bowl in our collection at the Mint called the Saturn Bowl.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, that's one where I was experimenting with new design.

MS. DOUGLAS: Could you describe it a little bit and how you did it?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, that has, like, a continuous, like the rings of Saturn. It has a circular band of wood that sticks out farther than the bowl. That's just one of the design things I'm experimenting with, probably.

MS. DOUGLAS: That was technically hard to do, though, or not, to create those flanges?

MR. MOULTHROP: Well, yes, it was technically harder to do. Most of the variations, I do get technically harder, and that one's one that was technically hard.

MS. DOUGLAS: And what about the picture of this piece here, if you could describe it and how you did it?

MR. MOULTHROP: That one, the one at Rockefeller Center in the Rainbow Room, that one was an experimental one where you have to work from the front of the lathe and then the back of the lathe, and hollow from both sides.

MS. DOUGLAS: Could you describe the form?

MR. MOULTHROP: I don't know how you could describe it. No, it looks like a jellyfish, I guess, shape, except it's hollow on the back side and on the front side.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, it looks like a large vessel that's got a collar turned down on it.

MR. MOULTHROP: Yeah, well, the outside curves around downward. And to do that effect, you have to hollow it from the back. And I did that because that was sort of a challenge.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have you made other pieces like that?

MR. MOULTHROP: Yes, I've done, for a while, I did quite a few like that. And this one is probably the second one

they’ve had up at the Rainbow Room. The first one, it was right by the bar up there. And some men got in a big fight and knocked it over, broke it, and the Rockefeller Center asked me to repair it. And I said, no, it can’t be repaired. And so, they ordered another one. Then so, I made two for there. The picture you’re looking at there is the second one. And they relocated it not next to the bar next time.

MS. DOUGLAS: Okay, well, thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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